

# Climate Change Policy Analysis

Written by Lisa Wellman-Tuck

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/10/20/climate-change-policy-analysis/>

LISA WELLMAN-TUCK, OCT 20 2012

## Introduction

The climate change policies implemented by the United States of America are of particular importance due to the nation's status as the global hegemonic power. Although in current times this power is waning, the United States retains much of its symbolic influence as the 'leader of the free world'. In addition to this, given the large per capita greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions produced by the United States, the country has a global responsibility to enact strong and decisive climate change policies (Honkonen, 2009, p.257). However, at this stage, the US has failed to implement a federal 'cap and trade' system and is lagging behind other developed nations in its attempts to curb global warming. This paper attempts to give an analytic summary of the competing climate change policy platforms of the incumbent Democratic President Barack Obama and the Republican Presidential-candidate Mitt Romney. Through this analysis, a brief overview of the stances of both candidates will be outlined, followed by the role of special interest groups and the topics relevant to the upcoming election. To do this, a brief history of climate policy in the United States since the 1970s will be discussed. Essentially, this paper will argue that the policies of both Obama and Romney are not sufficient in addressing the problem of climate change. However, when examining both candidates, it can be asserted that Obama's climate policies are more comprehensive and environmentally sensitive compared to Romney's platform.

## US Climate Policy Background

Historically, there was a large degree of partisan support and public interest regarding environmental issues in the United States. During the early 1970s, significant environmental legislation was passed, including the National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act and the Clean Water Act (Mol et al, 2000, p. 26). At this time, environmental issues gained societal recognition and became part of the federal agenda principally because there was strong public, and thus political, will to implement a coordinated legislative response (Carlarne, 2010, p. 29). This was in the context of a wave of social and environmental movements that occurred during the 1960s and 70s, as well as a wider international recognition of these issues in the political sphere (Chesters, 2008, p. 74). This period also gave rise to organisations such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace, which were able to rally the public and exert pressure on political institutions in the United States (Chesters, 2008, p. 74).

By the 1980s, however, the momentum of the early environmental and social movement had been eroded amidst the '...regulatory rollbacks of the Reagan era' (Carlarne, 2010, p. 29). Throughout the Regan Administration, efforts were made to make existing environmental policy more efficient and 'business friendly', using executive authority to undo environmental protection and regulation (Lindstrom, 2011, p. 33). Reagan used his power to appoint 'industry - friendly' and even anti-environmental individuals to positions of authority. In particular, Reagan was successful in appointing people that held similar neoliberal ideologies to positions of judicial power (Vieira and Gross, 1998, p.7). This is evidenced by his appointment of Anthony Kennedy and Antonin Scalia as Supreme Court justices (Laham, 1998, p. 67).

The removal of environmental regulations characterises the conservative Republican ideology of 'small government' which has essentially dominated the United States environmental and climate change policy since the 1980s (Lindstrom, 2011, p. 34). The anti - regulatory, pro-business approach was, to a large extent, continued during the

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George H. W. Bush presidency in the early 1990s, despite the growing international awareness of climate change during his reign (Lindstrom, 2011, p. 34).

With the election of the 'pro-environment' President Clinton in 1993, he and Vice President Al Gore publically acknowledged America's disproportionate greenhouse gas emissions (GHG's) and accepted the need for fair and responsible burden sharing to tackle climate change (Harris, 2000, p. 38). In a shift away from Reagan-era environmental politics, Clinton proposed a target to stabilise the United States greenhouse gas emissions to 1990s levels by 2012, yet this target never became legally binding (Harris, 2000, p. 38). Relating to international climate negotiations, Clinton announced during the Kyoto Protocol[1] in 1997 that the United States would reduce its GHG emissions by seven percent (Harris, 2000, p. 38). Despite this, the Democratic Clinton / Gore Administration was only able to enact very modest climate policies due to the Republican domination of Congress.

Although Clinton was able to use his executive power to strengthen environmental regulation where possible, he was also seen to be making decisions that were deemed politically safe and compromising on many campaign promises regarding climate change policy (Lindstrom, 2011, p. 37). Clinton's push for policies that were in line with environmental as well as economic interests resulted in watered-down climate policies that did little to address the pressing issue at hand (Lindstrom, 2011, p. 37). In addition, Clinton also failed to pass a reauthorisation of key environmental legislation passed in the 1970s including the Clean Water Act (Lindstrom, 2011, p. 37). Despite the renewed focus on climate change under Clinton, the implementation of successful policy was limited and legislation was moderate at best.

Following the slight shift in policy direction in the 1990s, the election of Clinton's successor, Republican George W. Bush, saw the return of neoliberal, Reagan-era environmental politics. During the early stages of his Administration, Bush withdrew the United States signatory from the Kyoto Protocol. arguing that the science was uncertain and that legally-binding action on climate change '...would hurt the US economy' (Rahm, 2010, p. 41).

In spite of the federal position on climate change under President Bush, some progress was made to control GHG emissions between 2000 and 2008; however, this step forward was accomplished via states acting alone or in partnerships to '...redirect US climate policy after the default of the federal government' (Rahm, 2010, p. 41). During this time, California emerged as one such state willing to take decisive action on climate change and has been a leader in reducing air-based pollutants from passenger cars. In 2006 the state of California adopted legislation to put in place a 'cap and trade' system on the major greenhouse gas emitters (Linstroth, and Bell, 2007, p. 25).

On balance, despite the peak of environmentalism in the 1970s, climate policy in the United States prior to 2008 has been inspired by Reagan-era conservatism and a reluctance for decisive action on climate change both from a domestic and an international standpoint (Lindstrom, 2011, p. 37). This is linked to the ideology of small government and free market economics that has broadly characterised American politics since the establishment of the constitution which was adopted in 1789. During the early – mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, a period of progressive politicians increased the powers of government and reformed social and economic policy (Samples, 2010, p. 3). However, during the 1980s, Reagan sought to limit the scope of government influence and intervention by implementing strict neoliberal economic policies and adhering to traditionalist Republican philosophy (Samples, 2010, p. 3). This ideology has translated to political opinion concerning the environment regarding a hesitance of governments to implement interventionist policies (Samples, 2010, p. 3). This overview of US environmental policy since the 1970s has shown that policy is not static and is largely dependent on public will, Presidential initiative and congressional support.

## Obama: A New Era in Climate Policy?

With the election of the Democratic President Barack Obama in 2008, climate politics appeared to take a swift change in gears (Carlarne, 2010, p. 51). During his first term in office, Obama sought to reframe climate change as part of the larger problem related to energy and national security, thus attempting to bring the issue to the attention of his constituents. Over the past decade, there has been a growing tendency to consider climate change as a 'security issue', which moves it away from the realm of ordinary politics to the domain of 'security politics'. The securitisation of

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climate change implies that the issue will inevitably cause conflict over food, water and energy scarcity and consequently '...stronger interventions may be justified' (Fernando et al, 2012, p. 46). In framing climate change as a security issue, Obama is more likely to gain support of government initiatives to mitigate its effects. This is because the threat of climate change to the livelihood of everyday citizens is highlighted (Fernando et al, 2012, p. 46).

In practice, the introduction of the historic economic stimulus bill passed early in the Obama Administration included various provisions for energy efficiency and sustainability as a serious attempt to address climate change (Rahm, 2010, p. 41). In 2009, Obama released an executive order titled *Federal Leadership in Environmental, Energy and Economic Performance* (Obama, October 5, 2009) stating the government's intentions '...to increase energy efficiency; measure, report, and reduce their greenhouse gas emissions from direct and indirect activities'.

Despite Obama's rhetoric, during his first four years as President, he has faced considerable challenges in enacting any significant climate change legislation (Watson et al, 2012, p. 177). These challenges have included strong congressional opposition as well as weak public opinion on the topic. In regards to action on climate change, both the Senate and the House of Representatives are divided into various factions, which are split on issues such as ideology and economic interest (Broder, 2009). According to DiSalvo (2009, p. 27), factions are crucial players in Congress that '...shape members' preferences, develop policy agendas, and push those agendas on Capitol Hill'. According to DiSalvo (2009, p. 28), factions are organisational networks that link members of Congress to political party activists, intellectuals and interest groups. To create enough power to shape legislators' policy directions, factions have been established into formalised organisations such as the Democratic Study Group and the Conservative Opportunity Society, which are currently key players in Congress (2009, p. 28).

In regards to Obama's current climate policy platform in the lead-up to the 2012 Presidential election, the focus is on renewable energy investment and climate adaptation strategies as outlined in the 2011 *Blueprint for a Secure Energy Future* (The White House, March 2011). As stated in the blueprint, the Obama regime aims to increase transport efficiency via the implementation of a number of initiatives (The White House, 2011, p. 5). These initiatives include investment in '...advanced vehicle and fuel technologies, public transit, and high speed rail' (The White House, March 2011, p. 6). With the transport sector contributing to over seventy-percent of the petroleum consumption in the United States, it is important that these steps are taken. However, given the breadth and severity of the issue, these initiatives can be seen as only a drop in the ocean towards reducing harmful global climate change.

According to an article in the *Washington Post* by Maxwell Boykoff (January 28, 2012), the term 'climate change' was used only once in Obama's *State of the Union Address 2012*, whereas the notions of 'clean energy' and 'energy independence' were mentioned several times. In essence, this is a divergence away from Obama's original stance on climate change action towards a more consumer-friendly dialogue focused on energy and job security. Although Obama has made some progress in putting climate change back on the United States policy agenda, the policies of his administration are far from comprehensive, and are seemingly focused around market-based economic interests. Obama's renewed policy platform, which focuses on job security and energy independence, is more attuned to American interests and is thus likely to achieve congressional approval. This is because individual citizens of the United States are concerned with preserving the status quo of their daily lives (Byrne et al, 2007, p. 4556). This means that keeping their jobs and having energy and environmental security is a high priority for many Americans, particularly those who work in the agriculture industry and rely on climate stability for their income. This has been evidenced by various "bottom up" steps taken by individuals, companies and states to mitigate the effects of climate change and resource scarcity (Byrne et al, 2007, p. 4556).

## Romney: A Return to Reagan?

The 2012 Republican Presidential candidate Mitt Romney does not have a stated climate change policy (Wittes, 2012, p. 190). However, his energy policy is remarkably similar to that of Obama's with a primary focus on energy security and the protection of American jobs. According to the official Republican campaign website, Romney would act to amend the Clean Air Act to exclude carbon dioxide from its scope of influence and also seek to expand nuclear energy capabilities in the United States (Romney/Ryan, 2012).

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Romney's policies can be seen as conservative and are largely in line with the traditional Republican rhetoric. It has been a general trend for Republican politicians to deny / question the existence of climate change and this is reflected by the lack of policy generated regarding this topic. The Republican ideology is grounded in *laissez – faire* economics (Richardson, 1997, p. i) and a libertarian philosophy that asserts that individual liberty is the '...central requirement of justice' (Brennan, 2012, p. 1). Libertarian ideology maintains that the government should have a minimal influence in the affairs of individuals. In following this, citizens have autonomy over their own lives and, as long as they do not violate the needs of others, are free to make decisions based on personal interest (Brennan, 2012, p. 1). The notion of libertarianism has been applied to the issue of climate change by Republican politicians who have constantly stressed that it is not the place of governments to intervene and implement policies that will impact the lives of citizens. In addition to this, many Republicans in positions of power have employed denial strategies and used the right-wing media to cast doubt over the climate science in order to delay action on the issue (Lever-Tracy, 2010, p. 240).

Over the course of Romney's campaign, his stance on anthropogenic climate change has taken a rightward shift from moderate scepticism to outright denial. As recently as 2010, Romney accepted that climate change existed and was at least in part caused by human activity. This is evidenced in his 2010 book *No Apology: The Case for American Greatness* (Romney, 2010) in which he wrote, 'I believe that climate change is occurring. ... I also believe that human activity is a contributing factor'. However, in a speech at the Consol Energy Center in late 2011 Romney stated, 'My view is that we don't know what's causing climate change on this planet. And the idea of spending trillions and trillions of dollars to try to reduce CO2 emissions is not the right course for us' (Davenport, 2011).

Romney's position on climate change has been influenced by other prominent Republican politicians, including Newt Gingrich and Todd Akin, who reflect many of Romney's views on the environment. Although Romney's stance on climate change appeals to the vast majority of conservative Americans, his policies or lack thereof fail to address the threat of climate change and are insufficient according to international standards. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which was ratified in 1992, sets out a basic structure for the international regime that outlines the goal of stabilising greenhouse gas concentrations at safe levels (Bodansky, 2004, p. 3). To achieve this goal, nations are given precise emissions targets, implement carbon pricing systems and also participate in emission trading schemes. The extent of participation in these initiatives varies from country to country based on issues such as the nation's wealth and climate responsibility and political will (Morthorst, 2003, p. 73). However, given that the US has failed to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, it is not obligated to commit to specific emission reduction targets and, thus, is severely lagging behind other developed nations in this regard.

## Policy Influences and Special Interest Groups

When analysing the policy platforms of both Obama and Romney, it is important to consider the various factors which influence climate policy in the United States. These factors include pressure from the international community, the opinions of the American public, the composition of Congress and the influence of special interest groups. This section will pay considerable attention to the impact of lobbies and special interest groups on the formation of policy agendas in the US. Specifically, the influence of large oil and industrial companies as well as particular conservative religious lobbies will be examined. As Lemberg (2010, p. 8) argues, 'Lobbying is Washington's second largest industry, after government'. Therefore it is clear that special interest groups and lobbyists play a major role in influencing politicians and formulating policy agendas.

Fossil fuel companies have vested interests in delaying action on climate change given the wealth of the industry in the United States and abroad. Furthermore, this considerable wealth has also earned the industry great leverage in influencing policy decisions. Anti-climate lobby groups such as the Global Climate Coalition have been particularly influential on climate policy in the United States (Oberthür and Ott, 1999, p. 19). The Global Climate Coalition, which was predominantly influential in the 1990s, is made up of a number of energy, automotive and industrial companies which oppose policy action on the issue of climate change. There are many reasons that energy lobby groups have been so successful in influencing policy in the US (Oberthür and Ott, 1999, p. 19). Firstly, the fossil fuel industry is dominated by a small number of large companies, most of which reside in the United States. These companies, such as ExxonMobil, play a large role in sponsoring political campaigns and, thus, have a large degree of influence in

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Washington. Secondly, given the “open” nature of the political system in the US, lobby groups have had ‘...excellent access to policy makers’ (Oberthür and Ott, 1999, p. 19).

Generally, special interest groups donate funds to both candidates in order to persuade whoever is in government to take on positions favourable to their cause. An article commissioned by the National Bureau of Economic Research uses the analogy that policy is for sale and special interest groups are the buyers (Grossman and Helpman, 2000). Energy corporations and lobby groups play a major role in funding both the Democrat and Republican candidates so as to secure a debt that can be paid in the form of policies that are in line with their interests. According to The Centre for Responsive Politics (2012), the mega oil company ExxonMobil donated \$1,505,759 between both parties during the 2011 – 2012 period; however, a significantly higher portion of this was channelled into Republican coffers. From this statistic, it can be inferred that energy corporations have had particular influence over the climate policies of both major political parties in the United States – in particular the Republican Party, which has continued to uphold radical neoliberal economic ideologies that have led to environmental degradation and ecological disasters. The 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico can be used as an example of the neoliberal economic practices of large energy corporations (in this case Halliburton) resulting in massive ecological crises (National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drill, 2011, p. 2). Incidentally, the major oil corporation Halliburton has contributed significantly to political campaign donations since the 1990s (CampaignMoney, 2012).

In addition to oil companies and special interest groups from the energy industry, religious organisations and lobbies play a crucial role in influencing climate change policy in the United States (Salzmann, 2009, p. 15). According to Sherkat and Ellison (2007, p. 71), the link between “Judeo-Christian” values and a desire to control nature has contributed to a decline in substantial environmental policies in the United States. Antipathy towards environmental protection and climate change policy in the United States stems from fundamentalist religious beliefs regarding the ‘end of the world’ (Barker and Bearce, 2012, p. 2). Essentially, end – times believers maintain that ‘...Jesus will one day return to Earth and commence a series of events’ including the Rapture and Armageddon (Barker and Bearce, 2012, p. 2). This perspective has dominated evangelical thought for over 70 years and it is believed by conservative religious figures that climate change is a sign that the Rapture is near.

When assessing end – times theology, it is clear that these beliefs have a defined influence on public attitudes towards action on climate change. Whilst non-believers may have an inherent concern for the future, ‘...end-times believers “know” that life on Earth has a preordained expiration date, no matter what—and that all Christians will be raptured before the going gets too tough’ (Barker and Bearce, 2012, p. 4). Following this premise, many fundamental religious organisations perceive efforts to mitigate the effects of climate change to be both futile and ill-advised.

The religious attitudes towards climate change mentioned above have significant influence on policy formation in the United States. For one thing, many individuals in positions of power in the US hold conservative religious views that influence their position on various policy issues (Utter and True, 2004, p. 2). Typically, the Republican Party attracts the majority of religious conservatives in the United States and therefore is highly influenced by the philosophies of end – times believers (Genda, 2010, p. xi). According to Edsall (2012), evangelical Christians make up over 50 percent of all Republican voters in the United States. This statistic is considerably higher in states such as South Carolina, Alabama and Mississippi (Edsall, 2012).

In addition, as a highly religious society, many of these conservative religious beliefs permeate broad public opinion regarding climate change mitigation and adaptation. Because of this, climate change is not seen as a matter of importance to political candidates, whose role is to address the concerns of citizens (Manza et al, 2002, p. 9).

## Relevance to the 2012 Presidential Election

The issue of climate change, whilst a matter of national and global concern, has received little attention from either the Democrats or Republicans in the lead up to the 2012 Presidential election. Reasons for this include a preoccupation with other pertinent issues such as the global financial crisis, a lack of public engagement, and the long-term nature of the threat of climate change.

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President Obama, in contrast to his 2008 campaign, has not highlighted climate change as a major issue for the 2012 Presidential election. Romney, keeping in line with the Republican dogma, has maintained that climate science is refutable and that it is 'not a man-made problem' (Downie, 2012). Both candidates have focused their campaigns primarily around the currently struggling US economy and issues regarding healthcare and immigration. Despite his initial lack of attention to the issue, Obama has recently stated in his speech at the Democratic Convention on the 5<sup>th</sup> of September that '...climate change is not a hoax' and that 'More droughts and floods and wildfires are not a joke. They're a threat to our children's future. And in this election, you can do something about it' (Obama, 5<sup>th</sup> September 2012). Obama has argued that although his climate policy does not aim to drastically reduce carbon emissions, he, unlike Romney will '...not let oil companies write this country's energy plan' (King, 2012).

Another reason that the issue of climate change has failed to be adequately addressed in the lead up to the 2012 election is a decline of public interest in the matter. According to Norgaard (2011, p. 74), although climate science has become ever more comprehensive in the past decades, paradoxically there has been a decline in public interest, which has greatly influenced political agendas in the United States. This perspective is explored by Conway and Oreskes (2010, p. 10), who assert that sceptics and interest groups have used doubt and scare tactics to obscure public opinion on the issue of climate change. With the presentation of climate change as a 50 / 50 debate in the media, the position of sceptics has been adopted by much of the American public who find it more comforting to reject the science than take action on such a wide-scale and morally-confronting issue. With public opinion in the United States regarding action on climate change being lukewarm at best, politicians have had very little incentive to address the issue leading up to the 2012 election (Brulle et al, 2012, p. 170). This assertion is backed up by Michaelowa (1998, p. 1) who states that, 'National politicians see climate policy as one issue among many others, one which only becomes relevant if it captures voters' attention'.

According to Michaelowa (1998, p. 1), politicians generally favour issues which have short-term solutions and quick fixes. This is in order to maximise their recognition and credibility once they have left office as they are seen to have actually achieved something and 'left their mark' (Cohen and Boyd, 2000, 147). Given its impending threat and global nature, climate change is not such an issue, and thus, is not marketable for a candidate seeking office with four-year tenure. This is an additional reason that climate change policy has not been addressed as a major campaign issue by either Obama or Romney over the last year.

## Comparison and Analysis

When comparing the climate change policy stances of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, there are many factors which must be considered including the history of environmental policy in the United States and the influence of lobbies and special interest groups on policy formation. According to Roselle and Spray (2012), it is very difficult to ascertain the degree to which special interest groups have influence over the formation of policy. However, when examining the role of energy lobbies in funding political campaigns in the United States, it is fair to say that there is a strong correlation between the lack of comprehensive climate policies and the pressure exerted by large-scale energy corporations.

Obama, having campaigned strongly on the issue 2008, has essentially reduced his focus on climate change in the lead up to the 2012 presidential election. This can potentially be attributed to strong lobbying on the part of energy companies and federal opposition to climate legislation in Congress during the early years of his administration (Steinberg and VanDeVeer, 2012, p. 359). Given the strong libertarian ideology held by the majority of Republican politicians, it is unsurprising that Romney does not support large-scale government intervention to mitigate the effects of climate change (Barrington, 2012, p. 71).

With Obama at least acknowledging the existence anthropogenic climate change, his stance on the issue can be seen as a step ahead of Romney's in regards to addressing the problem. However, when considering the increasing public apathy towards action on climate change in the US, it can be deduced that Obama will face considerable opposition in enacting any solid climate legislation if re-elected in 2012. At the culmination of 2011, only around a quarter of American citizens believed that Obama had fulfilled his specific campaign promises (Skocpol and Jacobs, 2012, p. 3). Obama's failure to enact a federal 'cap and trade' system or any significant climate regulations between

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2008 and 2012 has shown the difficulties that are faced in passing legislation under the United States' political system. Obama, since taking office in 2008, has faced a tough social, political and economic climate and fierce opposition in Congress. Although future outcome cannot be easily predicted, it can be assumed that these challenges will continue into the future Presidency as we enter into an uncertain and politically volatile phase of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Skocpol and Jacobs, 2012, p. 4).

## Conclusion

In this paper, the climate change policy positions of Democratic President Barack Obama and rival Republican candidate Mitt Romney have been examined considering the history of environmentalism in the United States and the influence of special interest groups. Along with this, the issue of climate change policy was discussed in relation to its relevance to the upcoming election, taking into account various social and economic forces including public indifference and the financial crisis that has delayed political action on the issue.

With the peak of environmentalism in the United States occurring in the 1970's, there has been a considerable period of apathy and inaction regarding issues such as global warming over the last 30 years. However, given the severe and impending threat that climate change poses not just to the United States but to the whole world, strong political action needs to be taken immediately to mitigate the effects of climate change and prevent the earth from passing dangerous tipping points.

Currently, neither Obama nor Romney have developed sufficient climate change policies to meet these needs and given its oil-dependent economy and the influence of energy lobbies, the United States will face considerable challenges in reducing the impact of climate change without robust legislation and a political commitment to the issue.

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[1] The 1997 Kyoto Protocol was signed by Clinton but has never been ratified to this date (Lemberg, 2010, p. 13)

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*Date written: October 2012*